

## **OVERALL ENVIRONMENTAL EXCELLENCE AWARD**

### **1. Leadership and Innovation**

#### **A Window to the Wild**

Blank Park Zoo's (BPZ) mission is to inspire an appreciation of our natural world through education, recreation and conservation. While many view a zoo as an organization existing strictly in the recreation realm, Blank Park Zoo takes its conservation and natural resource preservation responsibilities very seriously. Within the organization, employees take a direct role in improving the environmental impacts of daily operations, continually work to educate our community and make a significant impact on the preservation of species, both locally and globally. As each year more people visit zoos than NFL, NBA and professional baseball games combined, zoos have an unparalleled opportunity to make a huge impact on environmental awareness and responsibility. Blank Park Zoo strives to be not only Iowa's wildest adventure, but also one of Iowa's environmental leaders, taking direct action and inspiring our central Iowa community to become responsible global citizens.

For a small zoo, we have a huge audience (2014 total audience 463,893) that comes through our gates and participates in various conservation-education programming throughout our state and beyond. We take this opportunity/responsibility very seriously.

We believe BPZ should be recognized as an environmental leader because of our level of commitment to sustainability and wildlife conservation, our state-wide/regional reach and our innovation and creativity in addressing environmental concerns.

#### **Our Conservation Philosophy**

Blank Park Zoo believes that every individual makes a difference and that all things are connected. (Attached: Conservation Logo)

- We pledge to practice what we teach
- We support conservation efforts relating to animals in our collection as well as programs focused on saving habitats and endangered species
- We understand conservation is about people; in situ (in the wild) work must take local stakeholders into account.
- We think globally and act locally
- We incorporate conservation messages for all audiences

#### **Conservation Alliance**

We are accomplishing conservation goals with the following Conservation Alliance Teams. Teams are coordinated by a newly formed, full-time staff position; Conservation Manager.

##### **Green Team**

- Work to reduce the impact of the Zoo's daily operations on the environment, educate and inspire guests to do their part in helping the planet and lower the Zoo's monetary expenditures through conservation efforts. The team consists of four subcommittees, each tackling a specific environmental concern: 1) Water Conservation 2) Energy Conservation 3) Resource Conservation and Recycling and 4) Communication.

##### **Partnerships Team**

- Solicit, review and award financial and in-kind support for in-situ conservation projects (locally, nationally, globally).

#### Conservation Events / Fundraising Team

- Lead the planning, publicizing, staffing and staging of conservation events and activities.
- Work on various joint initiatives with other conservation teams and external partners in an effort to raise funds and awareness of Blank Park Zoo's conservation efforts and efforts supported by the Zoo's initiatives.

#### Regional Conservation Team

- Develop partnerships with regional zoos to aid in regional-specific environmental and wildlife conservation issues.
- Coordinate BPZ-hosted conservation workshops for regional organizations. Main focus: Plant.Grow.Fly.

#### Local Outreach Team

- Develop partnerships with local conservation organizations and take action in our local community. All Zoo staff, board members, volunteers and ambassadors will have the opportunity to participate in hands-on projects, coordinated by the committee.

#### Education and Communications Team

- Coordinate Zoo conservation days and Earth Day activities for our local community
- Incorporate conservation messaging and activities in educational programming

#### American Association of Zookeepers (AAZK)

- The mission of the American Association of Zoo Keepers is to advance the excellence in the animal keeping profession, foster effective communication beneficial to animal care, support deserving conservation projects and promote the preservation of our natural resources and animal life.

### **Positive Leader in Our Field**

In 2013, Blank Park Zoo held the high honor of hosting the Zoos and Aquariums Committing to Conservation (ZACC) conference here in Des Moines. This biannual conference, usually held at much larger zoos, brings together zoo professionals and field researchers from around the world to find ways to deepen partnerships to support environmental stewardship and endangered animal populations. BPZ was chosen to host as a model for what "small" zoos can do for environmental stewardship and wildlife conservation. We welcomed environmental leaders from around the globe and are proud to be known nationally and internationally for our commitment to conservation and environmental stewardship. (Attached: ZACC Travel Map, ZACC Picture)

We are also a leader among our peers when it comes to pollinator conservation. As described below, our premier local conservation project, Plant.Grow.Fly. (PGF), has been extremely successful. To date, ten other Midwest zoos are in the process of implementing PGF with our support.

### **Innovation and Creativity in Natural Resource Management**

BPZ conducts various conservation initiatives both on-grounds and across the globe. A few of our most innovative initiatives include UpCycle, Vermiculture Program and Conservation Gear Donation Program.

- **UpCycle:** In partnership with the City of Des Moines, Trees Forever, and Polk County Conservation, BPZ removes invasive species including mulberry, ash and honeysuckle from our local parks. Removing invasive species helps improve our water quality and diversify our woodlands by allowing native plants to thrive and improving soil quality. The invasive species

are then taken back to the Zoo to feed our giraffes and rhinos. Everybody wins! (Attached: UpCycle picture, UpCycle Logo)

- **Vermiculture Program:** BPZ is revitalizing our vermiculture (worm composting) program with improved capacity and additional educational elements. We employ red wigglers to consume many items we dispose of at the Zoo each day, diverting waste from our landfill. The compost is used on our grounds, replacing chemical fertilizers. We will also feature an educational display to share the benefits of vermiculture to Zoo guests. (Attached: Worms)
- **Conservation Gear Donation Program:** In 2008, all BPZ staff received new uniforms. Rather than sending the old to the landfill, we decided to send it to a place in need: The Pan African Sanctuary Alliance (PASA). PASA was created over the last three decades to accommodate the staggering number of orphaned chimpanzees, gorillas, bonobos and other endangered primates in Africa. PASA sanctuaries literally span the continent of Africa and all possible funds are dedicated to the care of these primates. Along with giving our “old” uniforms a second life, BPZ also gave boots and tools as well as monetary support. Since then, BPZ has supported PASA sanctuaries in Africa on an annual basis with both monetary and in-kind support. (Attached: PASA Picture, Supplies Picture, Thank You Picture)

## 2. Sustainable Environmental Results

Blank Park Zoo’s efforts to promote environmental awareness and green ideals began internally. As any thriving organization, a zoo requires a large amount of resources and, therefore, also creates a significant amount of waste. In efforts to increase sustainability, the Zoo has implemented many simple solutions and other, more creative, programs in its 63,000 square feet of heated buildings and 22 acres of grounds.

### Environmental Stewardship Programs and Impacts

#### Waste prevention

Feature program: Conservation Gear Donation Program, the donation of gently used Zoo uniforms, tools and supplies to African animal sanctuaries (as described above) rather than disposing.

- Printer paper is reused, when appropriate
- Reusable hand towels in staff bathrooms
- Adding “Consider the environment before printing this email” footnote to staff email signatures
- Recycling program in our office facilities for paper, cardboard, plastic, tin, aluminum
- Zoo volunteers are given reusable water bottles to use while volunteering
- Plastic and aluminum recycling program for our guests throughout the Zoo
- Recycling program for Zoo maps to be recycled or reused
- All hazardous chemicals, office equipment, batteries and ballasts are recycled and properly disposed
  - Since 2008, we have recycled 159 ballasts, 1273 fluorescent bulbs, 120 incandescent bulbs, 192 pounds of batteries, 21 pounds of toner and 4,268.70 pounds of computer components/electronics
- Repurposing materials for special events and education programs; for example – toilet/paper towel rolls, egg cartons, plastic Easter eggs, plastic bottles, plastic bags, baby food jars
- Cardboard boxes, old towels/blankets/t-shirts, toilet/paper towel rolls/phone books are repurposed as animal enrichment
- Feed bags and buckets are repurposed in animal areas
- Staff kitchen is stocked with real plates, cups, and silverware. All staff are encouraged not to use plastic or paper

- All appropriate handheld electronic devices (e.g. cell phones, tablets) are sent to Eco-Cell to be reused or recycled. Coltan, a main component of these devices is mined from critical gorilla habitat. To date, 69 devices have been sent.
- Collect and send printer cartilages to be recycled
- Vermiculture (worm compost bins) installed outside animal-diet preparation areas
- Branches used to perch and furnish animal exhibits
- Annual participation in Des Moines Park and Recreation's "Trash Bash" on Earth Day

#### Energy Conservation

Feature program: \$8,202 in rebates from Mid-American Energy (Attached: MidAmerican rebates, MidAmerican totals)

- Administrative office participates in "Black-Out Mondays," where staff is encouraged to keep the lights off in the administration building
- Thermostats are kept at a constant temperature in the office building and staff is encouraged to turn lights off when leaving areas
- Energy efficient light bulbs and LEDs replace standard light bulbs, motion detector lights installed where appropriate
- In our low-attendance times, staff is encouraged to delay the operation of energy using features of exhibits until visitors arrive
- We have 1 electric work vehicle
- Research is currently being conducted to install solar panels at the Zoo

#### Water Conservation

Feature Program: Reusable water bottles: Bottles are sold in BPZ's gift shop and "filling stations," installed in partnership with Des Moines Water Works, are featured throughout the Zoo. To date, 48,474 disposable water bottles have been saved! (Attached: Filling Station, Plastic Bottles Saved)

- Installation of rain barrels throughout the Zoo, used to water gardens
- Installation of efficient dishwasher in staff room to decrease the amount of water used to wash dishes
- Many exhibits, ponds and aquariums have sophisticated filtration systems, decreasing the amount of water used in cleaning and refilling

#### Conservation purchasing policies

Feature Program: In a new construction project, we installed sustainable ceiling tiles made from recycled juice boxes (10'x 15'). (Attached: Juice-box Ceiling, Juice Box Full)

- Purchase of recycled labels, sustainable ink, and reusable cleaning supplies
- 95% of our contractors are local and work with our staff to ensure all new buildings are environmentally friendly and sustainable
- Gift Shop stocks "fair trade" and environmentally friendly items. (Example: Ocean Sole are unique animal sculptures made out of discarded flip flops, which have washed up on the shoreline of East Africa. Ocean Soles generates sustainable income for local families as well as needed funding for marine conservation efforts in East Africa.) (Attached: Ocean Sole)
- Gift Shop is phasing out the use of plastic bags, we will use our stock and should be phased out by October of 2015, this will save 16,000 bags per year!

- Purchase of recycled bulk paper beads from chimpanzee conservation program in Uganda, sold at conservation-education station in African exhibit, profits allow Ugandan children to attend school. (Attached: Ugandan Beads)

### **Wildlife/Nature Area Improved**

Feature Program: Plant.Grow.Fly. Plant.Grow.Fly. (PGF) is a habitat preservation and recognition project aimed to increase awareness about the decline of our native pollinators and to encourage the community to take **action** to conserve them. The action we are encouraging is the planting of feeding and breeding habitat (butterfly gardens) in backyards, at schools, and at places of business. To date, we have 228 registered habitats. (Attached: PGF Numbers, PGF Habitat Map, PGF Logo, PGF Garden Page, PGF Des Moines Register)

- Restoration in four marshes in Chicaqua Park with Polk County Conservation
- Removal of invasive plant species from Chicaqua Park, in partnership with Polk County Conservation
- Annual participation in the “Amazing Prairie Festival” with Polk County Conservation (prairie seed harvesting for future restoration projects)
- Expansion of native plantings on Zoo grounds, approximately 15 acres, including 10 Plant.Grow.Fly. gardens
- Planting of 30-35 conifers and deciduous trees in 2015
- Installation of 2 honeybee hives on Zoo grounds to pollinate Zoo and Southside of Des Moines (Attached: Hives)
- Planting of vegetable garden, herb garden and 8 fruit trees to help supplement our animals dietary and enrichment needs
- BPZ and Des Moines Park Recreation Partnership on UpCycle Program as described above. In 2014, 14 truckloads of invasive species were removed by BPZ. So far in 2015, we have removed 4 truckloads.

### **Wildlife Population Preservation**

Feature Program: Prairie-Chicken Restoration Project. Over the past five years, BPZ and the IDNR have annually translocated 100 prairie-chickens (most years, 50 male and 50 female) from healthy populations in Nebraska to southern Iowa and northern Missouri, which comprises approximately 70,000 acres of suitable habitat referred to as the Grand River Grasslands. Through GPS tracking, much has been learned about the species, the project and requirements for future success. In 2015, 46 male birds were observed on the lek (a breeding grounds) in Iowa. Before the project started there were only 3. BPZ will continue to support monitoring efforts for the population in the future. (Attached: Prairie Chicken Annual Report, Prairie Chicken Worth the Hassle, Prairie Chicken Picture)

- Mallard duck nest monitoring with Polk County Conservation
- Enlisting of community members to knit wildlife rehab nests, distributed to wildlife rehabbers regionally (Attached: Nests)
- Breeding and release of 36 trumpeter swans with Iowa Department of Natural Resources since 1999. (Attached: Trumpeter Swans)

### **3.Economic Results**

Many of the environmental stewardship programs are a cost savings for the Zoo and include:

Feature program: Energy efficient appliances and lighting have allowed for MidAmerican rebates, currently total \$8,202 (Attached: MidAmerican Rebates)

- In January 2015, BPZ created a new, full-time conservation position, Conservation Manager (salary amount available upon request)

- Savings on energy usage from installation of energy efficient appliances and other energy saving initiatives as described above (Attached: MidAmerican Totals)
- Savings on energy usage from our efficient light bulbs/LED lighting
- Savings on water usage from our rain barrels and water filtration systems
- Savings on the cost of animal diets with the produce that we harvest from our vegetable garden, we saved over \$100 in 2014
- We have received \$83.50 from our handheld electronic device recycling program (funds allocated to GRACE gorilla sanctuary in Africa)

#### **4.Participation/Involvement**

##### CEO and Directors

Blank Park Zoo's CEO and Directors are uniformly committed to conservation and sustainability. Many lead and serve on the Zoo's Conservation Alliance Teams. They also contracted conservation consultants to work with BPZ in the fall of 2012 to evaluate and improve programs and staff-wide "buy-in." Conservation projects and initiatives are also a priority within the Zoo's budget. In 2014, more than \$59, 344 was allocated with a total of \$15,837 dedicated to Iowa's biodiversity and lands through Plant.Grow.Fly. and our prairie-chicken project. As a non-profit, this level of financial investment is a testament to our commitment to conservation, starting at home in Iowa, where we truly think globally and act locally.

##### Employee and Board of Directors Involvement

Every employee and board member at the Zoo is involved in environmental stewardship and wildlife conservation. They participate in the following ways:

- Many staff and board members serve on one of our Conservation Alliance Teams
- Each staff person and board member participates in the sustainable practices on grounds
- Many have volunteered both staff and personal time to the following projects throughout the year: UpCycle, Plant.Grow.Fly., Trash Bash and the Prairie Chicken Translocation Project

##### Volunteers

Our volunteers play a huge role in implementing our environmental policies and practices. In 2014, we had 2,387 volunteers work 29,073.48 hours with an economic impact of \$634,977.

- Volunteer "adopt a garden" club to enhance natural landscaping on Zoo grounds
- Maintaining our vegetable garden
- Ensuring success of public recycling programs at special events
- Volunteering for our local outreach projects like Trash Bash, marsh restoration, prairie seed harvesting, etc. (over 100 hours total for 2014)
- Volunteers dedicated 233 hours to Plant.Grow.Fly. in 2014

##### Zoo Guests, Zoo Members and Zoo Audience

Blank Park Zoo has an amazingly large audience and reach. We had 463,893 in our audience in 2014 and our membership is currently 10,745. Engaging our many and diverse constituents in true conservation actions is paramount to our mission. They have the opportunity to make a positive impact on our environment in the following ways:

- Coins for Conservation: Every guest coming to Blank Park Zoo is notified that 25 cents of their regular admission price, or \$1 of every membership purchased, goes directly to support conservation efforts

locally, nationally and internationally. Guests are then given a token and provided the opportunity to choose one of three conservation initiatives they would like to support. By simply dropping their token in a fun, interactive coin machine, they have joined thousands in helping the Zoo protect and conserve wildlife around the world and right here in Iowa. Our current projects are: International Rhino Foundation, Giraffe Conservation Foundation and our local Prairie-Chicken Translocation Project. (Attached: Coins for Conservation)

- Participation in Plant.Grow.Fly. by planting pollinator habitat, or butterfly garden, at their home, school or place of business
- On-grounds environmental stewardship: recycling, filling stations for reusable water bottles
- Conservation special events and programming including: annual Speaker Series, Party for the Planet (Earth Day), Animal Conservation Days, Annual Conservation Fundraiser, Conservation Lunch and Learns, educational programming

#### Community Outreach/Partnerships/Stakeholder Involvement

We are continually working with our community by building partnerships and involving all stakeholders. Our best example is our Plant.Grow.Fly. (PGF) partnership program.

Each PGF partner is asked to help us disseminate PGF information to their audience throughout the year through events and programs. They encourage their audience to plant and register habitats. In return, we post their logo on our website and help advertise any pollinator programming they are conducting. They are also granted free booth space at our annual Butterfly Festival.

We are proud to have 36 official PGF partners including: Des Moines Park and Recreation, Polk County Conservation, Monarch Joint Venture, Iowa Native Plant Society, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Polk County Soil and Water Conservation District, Rainscaping Iowa, Des Moines Area Community College, Iowa State University's Reiman Gardens, Warren County Conservation, Buchanan County Conservation, Story County Conservation, Dorothy Peacut Nature Center, Forest Avenue Outreach, University of Northern Iowa Tallgrass Prairie Center, Plant Iowa Natives, Iowa Environmental Council, Science Center of Iowa, Botanical Center of Greater Des Moines, Neal Smith Wildlife Refuge, Living History Farms, Madison County Conservation Board, Friends of the Garden, Drake University, Iowa Prairie Network, Sierra Club – Iowa Chapter, Dallas County Conservation, Des Moines Audubon Society, Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, O'Brien County Conservation Board, Iowa State University's STRIPS, The Nature Conservancy, Jackson County Conservation/Huntsville Interpretive Center, Linn County Conservation, Hardin County Conservation, Badger Creek Lake Watershed Project, as well as a few Cooperating Organizations including: For Lands Sake, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Empowering Nature and People and Monarch Gardens.

PGF is also a recipient of a REAP grant this year with Polk County Conservation.

#### **5. Benefits to Workers/Environment/Community**

Blank Park Zoo exists to inspire people, young and old, to conserve our natural environment by imparting our knowledge to every visitor about the life on our planet and what can be done to protect it. We are dedicated to connecting our communities to nature, building a deepened awareness and understanding about the vast world around us. Through our on-site programs and sustainable practices at the Zoo, families can teach their children about recycling and energy conservation. Through our community outreach programs, families can get the kids away from their phones, T.V. and video games and out in the backyard – getting dirty!

The programs described above have raised the overall quality of life for Iowans in so many ways. Beyond providing a fun, educational and affordable day out for individuals and families, we also reach all 99 counties in Iowa with conservation education through our various outreach programs. We conduct programs for the young and old at schools, libraries, daycares and retirement homes. In 2014, 16,561 adults and 43,762 children were the beneficiaries

of this programming. We also hold conservation teacher workshops throughout the year at the Zoo, allowing teachers to bring conservation messages into daily lessons and grow our reach exponentially. In 2014, 275 local Iowa teachers attended such workshops.

We have two daily sea lion and seal demonstrations at the Zoo. These are often the highlight of our guests' experience and not only showcase our animal training programs, but also important water conservation issues with locally focused action suggestions. In 2014, 16,450 people were reached through these demonstrations.

In 2014, 3,866 Iowans were educated about the need for increased pollinator habitat through Plant.Grow.Fly. This year, we are on track to reach many more. To date, we have reached more than 2,200 individuals of all ages with PGF presentations and programming. This type of raised awareness will help drive pollinator conservation for years to come.

## **6. Transferability**

We have inspired countless community members to replicate our sustainable practices. One the best examples is Plant.Grow.Fly. Immediately after the close of our pilot year (2014), we exported PGF to 40 other Midwest zoos. We packaged together all the lessons learned, registration documents, website information templates, curriculum and logos. We are encouraging other zoos to implement PGF at their institution. 10 of the 40 have expressed interest and will be implementing PGF at various levels. With the participation of other midwestern zoos (some of the biggest zoos in the nation), we can bolster other restoration projects to enhance habitat throughout the Midwest for pollinators (Attached: Zoo Partnership Packet)

Our 36 PGF partners are replicating this project as well through conservation education programming throughout the state. Blank Park Zoo has become a "hub" for countless organizations and educators for pollinator conservation.

Lastly, through our 2013 Zoos and Aquariums Committing to Conservation (ZACC) conference, we have inspired many other zoos (especially small zoos) that each zoo, no matter your size or resources, can truly make a difference. We are proud to be leader to our peers in driving the cultural shift within zoos from purely a recreational realm to one focused on conservation action.